

Lesbianism in China

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Lesbianism in China has a long but usually hidden history. This paper examines the historical and literary sources of the past to illustrate the history of lesbianism and then turns to a survey of lesbianism in the China of today. As in the past, lesbianism remains more or less hidden, and comes to light only occasionally. Data for contemporary China comes from a visit to an institution for delinquent young women, recent police records, and contemporary fiction. It has only been in the past 4 or 5 years that it was possible to talk about lesbianism and most lesbians are fearful of becoming identified.

KEY WORDS: lesbianism; China; history; contemporary.

INTRODUCTION

Though information about homosexuality in China has begun to percolate to the West (Weixing, 1964; Ruan and Chong, 1987; Ruan and Tsai, 1987, 1988; Shamshasha, 1989; Hinsch, 1990), lesbianism has been ignored. Two studies, however, did examine lesbianism in Hong Kong (Lieh-Mak, *et al.*, 1983; Norrgard, 1990), but only one included a reference to developments on the mainland. This paper attempts to remedy this by an overview of the history and literature of lesbianism in mainland China with brief references to other areas. The information for mainland China is based upon personal observations and interviews as well as reports from current Chinese publications.

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HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Traditionally, Chinese have viewed male homosexuality and lesbianism as unrelated. This means that much of the existent material on male homosexuality in China cannot apply to the female experience. The issue is further complicated by the fact that men, and most literature and source material was written by men for men, do not usually accurately report what women do or think.

The lack of references to lesbianism in early Chinese literature as compared to male homosexuality, however, is no proof that lesbianism did not exist. It can be assumed that it existed and was tolerated, at least in households where there were many wives, concubines, and slaves or servants, if only because of the Chinese belief in the value of the yin substance of women. Taoist sexual practices, in fact, developed to assist men in drawing this substance from women in order to add to their declining supply of yang. Unlike male masturbation, which was actively discouraged, female masturbation was tolerated, and this applies to mutual masturbation between females. Several of the ancient Chinese sexual handbooks include positions involving two women and one man in which lesbian acts comprise part of the sexual activity. Some of the illustrations show lesbian activity (Girchner, 1957, p. 94; Van Gulik, 1961, pp. 48, 109, 274; Ishihara and Levy, 1968, p. 70; Yeh, 1914, p. 4; Bullough and Bullough, 1978).

In the picturesque language of the Chinese, lesbian behavior is described as *mojingzi* (rubbing mirrors or mirror grinding). Mirrors were ground together to make them smooth and the idea of female genitalia rubbing against other female genitalia without any major protuberances invoked the simile (Girchner, 1957, p. 94; Yao, 1941, p. 49).

Lesbian relationships are also celebrated in Chinese literature and art. Perhaps the best known example of lesbian love is in the play, *Lien-hsiang-pan* [Loving the Fragrant Companion], written by the Ming author Li Yu (1611–1680). This describes the love of a young married woman for a younger unmarried woman whom she met while visiting a temple. The married woman, Shih, falls in love with the beautiful and talented Yun-hua, and promises the girl that she shall try to have her made a concubine of her husband so that they will always be together. Her scheme ultimately succeeds to the delight of not only Yen-hua and Shih but also Shih's husband. The play includes some outstanding poetic dialogues, especially between the two young women (Van Gulik, 1961, pp. 163, 302; Lieh Mak *et al.*, 1983).

Not all stories with lesbian themes end on such an upbeat note. Another story from the Ming dynasty in the collection *Hsin-Shih Heng-Yen* [Stories to Awaken Men] by Feng Meng-Lung (1574–1646) tells about a

certain King Hailing of the earlier Jin Dynasty (1115–1234). One of the king's concubines was Hu Ali with whose daughter he was also having an affair. Ignored by the king, Hu-Ali turned to one of her ladies-in-waiting, Shenge, for sexual activities. Shenge was unusual in that she dressed as a man, apparently by order of the king. When the two began to have sex together, Shenge presented Hu with a Chinese dildo, literally called "Mr. Horn," which both used in their lovemaking. Another lady-in-waiting, observing them together one night, and thinking Shenge was a man, reported her observations to the king. Though the king knew that Shenge was female, and in fact had had sex with her, he seized the opportunity to have Hu killed, after which Shenge committed suicide (Feng, 1981, pp. 428–421).

In the Ching Dynasty, Sung-ling Pu (1640–1715) described a very devoted lesbian relationship in his story "*Fung San Niang*." Fung fell in love with Shiyi Niang Fan, a younger woman who had previously refused proposals by young men. Shiyi in turn became enamored with Fung (Samshasha, 1984, pp. 276–277). A lesbian love match is also one of the themes of the 18th century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Hsueh Chin Tsao (1791/1982). Two actresses, one specializing in male roles, and the other in female ones, were passionately in love. The death of the female partner broke up the relationship which had so impressed the male hero of the novel, Jia Bao-yu, that he suggested to the surviving lesbian that she use an incense pot to burn in commemoration of her partner, the same custom observed in traditional marriages. That such a gesture was proposed (and accepted) indicates an acceptance of lesbianism by at least some segments of Chinese society.

There were also organized lesbian groups. Towards the end of the 19th century one such group known as the "*Mojing Dang*" (Rubbing mirror party) was reported in Shanghai. Origins of the group were said to have been in Guangdong province (Canton) several hundred years earlier where it had been called the "Ten Sisters." Founded by a Buddhist nun, couple members of the original group had gone through a marriage ceremony. This was not so much a matter of personal choice but of necessity because only by such a ceremony could they legally be allowed to live together as a couple. Members of the Ten Sisters took vows not to marry except among their group. If perchance family pressures or other pressures forced them into heterosexual marriages, they vowed to either commit suicide or find a way to eliminate their husbands. The Shanghai group, which had been in existence for about 20 years before it came to public attention, had about 20 members in 1925 (Zhonghua, 1925, Vol. 4, pp. 65-70).

Giving some support to the claim that the Hong Kong group had been founded by a person from Guangdong was the description by Chen (1928) of a lesbian organization called the "*Jinglanhui*," or the Golden Or-

chid Association, in Guangdong itself. Membership in the association was limited to women, many lived together as couples after completing a marriage ceremony in which one was designated a husband and the other a wife. The marriage ceremony included a wedding feast and an exchange of ritual gifts and was a legal necessity as indicated above. Some members of the Golden Orchid Association were reported to have also married men (perhaps to meet family obligations) but continued to belong or if that proved impossible, to maintain their contacts with other members of the association, if only surreptitiously.

A collection of folklore, *Zhonghua Changguo Fengsu Shi* [Gazeteer of Chinese Customs] (1935) recorded a similar group:

Whenever two members of the association develop deep attachments for each other, certain rites of "marriage" were performed. For such a "marriage" to be permitted, one partner has to be designated as "husband." The first step consists of offering a gift of peanut candies, honey, and other sweets to the intended partner. Once this is accepted, a night long celebration which is attended by mutual female friends follows. From then on the couple will live as "man and wife." Sexual practices including genital contact called "grinding bean curd" or the use of dildoes are practiced. The couple may also adopt female children and these children are eligible to inherit the property of their parents. (cited in Lieh-Mak *et al.*, 1983)

Lesbianism has often proven fascinating to male writers. A Ming dynasty writer, Zhang Jun-ying (1641) reported that he was an eyewitness to the mating of two lesbians and stated that they both had orgasms. The pseudonymous 17th century writer Siqiao Qushi (1691/1987) described two teenage girls:

Two sixteen year olds, Dangui and Xiangyu, slept together in one bed. In the beginning, they only touched each other's body with shame. After several nights of this, they kissed each other just as a man kisses a woman with passion and without shame. One night, they peeked while both their mothers had sex with an elderly man. This three-way sexual action so aroused them that they took off all their clothes and pretended to be a couple making love. First, Dangui, the eldest, acted as the "man." She told Xiangyu that though they did not have a penis like a man, they could use their fingers as substitutes. She kissed and sucked Xiangyu's nipples, touched Xiangyu's vulva, and then after having her spread her legs, tried to insert her finger into the vaginal opening. Even her small fingers could not get in at first but when she used her saliva as a lubricant, she successfully inserted her finger. At first Xiangyu felt pain, but after some time Xiangyu became excited and felt a wonderful feeling, and applauded Dangui as "my darling brother." At this moment, Xiangyu touched Dangui's vulva, and was surprised to find it so moist. She asked Dangui why she had urinated. Dangui told her that it was not urine but women's sexual secretion and promised that the next night she would play with her and she would find herself wet like me. After this, every night they engaged in sex play alternating roles as a man. Later they made a penis out of a white silk belt stuffed with cotton and they used it every night to gain their sexual pleasure. (pp. 406-408).

Sometimes the role division was stricter, and this distinction continued to exist into the 20th century.

In Hong Kong lesbians have a culture of dividing into men and women [butch and fem]. The one in the woman's role has to be passive and wait for the approach of the one in the man's role. If she takes an active role, those who act in the male role will not approach her, and all the lesbians in that circle will condemn her. So everyone must know clearly which role each individual will play, and each individual must act in her role. (Norrgard, 1990)

Chinese lesbians engaged in a wide variety of sexual practices including massage, rubbing the genitals together, mutual masturbation, cunnilingus, and using dildoes of various kinds. One of the more unique devices was known as a double olisbos. This was a short (8 to 10 inches) ribbed stick made of wood or ivory, with two silk bands attached to the middle. Each women put an end of the penis-like stick into their vagina and each held a ribbon which they alternated pulling in and out. Several Chinese medical books warn against the overzealous use of olisbos and other such devices on the grounds that they damaged the lining of the womb (Van Gulik, 1961, pp. 48, 163). One writer wrote that "women who insert powder into their vaginas or make a male stalk out of ivory and use it always injure their lives and quickly die." (Yeh, 1914, p. 7; Yasuyori, 1955, p. 650; Ishihara and Levy, 1968, p. 147).

The first scholarly investigation of lesbianism in China was by Chang (1926), a sociologist at National Peking University. He advertised for subjects in the 1920s, assuring the respondents of anonymity. His book contained verbatim accounts of six case histories, only one of which was of a female. She mentioned incidents of lesbianism in which she had engaged while in school during her adolescence. Unfortunately, this pioneer effort was not followed up because Chang was forced to resign from the university and with his example before them no one ventured publicly to continue such studies (Hashikawa, 1940).

LESBIAN IN CHINA TODAY

Lesbianism today, as it did in much of the past, remains rather hidden and is not easy to ferret out. Though names of those engaging in homosexual activities were occasionally posted on streetside bulletin boards in the 1970s, names of women were rare (Jin, 1984). Choi Wan, a 36-year-old journalist in Hong Kong, and an active lesbian, was interviewed by Norrgard (1990), a Seattle freelance writer and lesbian activist who speaks and reads Chinese:

Norrgard: I tried to find out about lesbians in China when I was living there, and it was very difficult. I was amazed at the level of ignorance and naivete. Choi: It's true. In China they're especially naive about lesbianism. Homosexuality among men

they can understand more, because it's more often represented in stories. You never read about women having relationships with women.

Norrsgard went on to report

In nearly ten years of visiting, studying, working, and living in China and Hong Kong, I had never managed to meet any women who identified as lesbians. It wasn't because I didn't look: Whenever I got on a conversational basis with someone who seemed relatively open or enlightened, I would ask about homosexuality. In China the response usually revealed an incredible degree of ignorance and naivete. It was refreshing not to be with homophobia, but the widespread ignorance was baffling. It was considered slightly scandalous even for a man and woman to hold hands in public, even if they were married, and sexual knowledge was scarce. Later, when I was studying in Beijing, I asked a young friend about lesbians, and she got that by-then-familiar blank look on her face. In a few minutes, though, she recalled a story she'd heard about two young women who went to the Marriage Bureau to register their bond. They were promptly arrested for their naivete. Homosexuality is illegal in China, yet ignorance about it is so vast that the two apparently were not even aware of the taboo.

Still occasionally and serendipitously lesbian incidents do come to light. The first author of this paper served as the keynote speaker of the first national workshop on sex education in China in August 1985. As a result of this talk, he was invited by the Shanghai Public Security Bureau to visit the Shanghai Delinquent Women's Correction Institution and encouraged to interview three women sex delinquents, one of whom, a Ms. Za, was regarded as an incorrigible sex "criminal." The following is a summary of his notes:

Ms. Za was 26 years old. She had been born into a family of Chinese intellectuals and had a more or less normal childhood. She had her first sexual encounter with a classmate and enjoyed it very much. Over the next few years she had sex with about 30 different men, without asking for any money in return. This conduct caused her to be labeled a "sex delinquent," and she was jailed several times. During one of her trips to jail, a certain Ms. X was her cellmate. Ms. X had been arrested and jailed for lesbian behavior. Ms. Za indicates she had not even heard about such behavior before meeting Ms. X. In jail, Ms. X treated Za as her lover, touching her, petting her, and opening up to her the possibilities of sex between women. Ms. Za enjoyed her sexual session with her cellmate, and later, after she had been discharged, continued to seek out other young women with whom to have sex although she stated that if a male was available she would prefer to have him as a sexual partner. (Fang Fu Ruan, personal note)

Though as a popular advice columnist in China, the author received many letters from gay men (Ruan and Tsai, 1988), no lesbian ever wrote him. It was not until 1987, when China began to lessen some of its harsh enforcement, that information about lesbianism began to surface. One collection of lives of homosexuals included a number of sketches of lesbians. Usually the cases deal with women who were badly treated by men and could not deal with male sexuality or women who were so unattractive that no men would approach them. Such themes might be the only way in which

lesbianism can be made acceptable to the reading audience and might not fully reflect the reality of the attachment. In one such account two women nurses in their 30s who work in the same hospital are lovers. One had been raped in the middle-school by a teacher and this tended to make her suspicious of males. The second woman was portrayed as both poor and unattractive, so unattractive that no male was willing to be her friend. These two women came together and since the hospital would not let them live together in the hospital's rent-free apartments they rented a private room. Both are devoted to each other (Wan, 1988, pp. 88-91). Another case is that of a woman who shortly after she became pregnant found her husband sent off to a labor camp because of his incorrect political views. Not long after this he was reported as having died. Unable or unwilling to remarry, she lived a hand-to-mouth existence with her infant son. One day, a woman she had never met before visited her, bringing food, and soon after moved in with her. The two soon shared not only their resources but the bed and the growing intimacy between them made them devoted friends and lovers (Wan, 1988, pp. 95-98).

Though there was talk of a secret lesbian social group in Beijing (Norrgard, 1990, p. 59), the one account of such an organization seems to belong more to fantasy than to reality. In a story entitled the *Lesbian Company*, a small group of lesbians in Beijing are described in rather unflattering terms. Most of the women had at one time been deeply in love with a man who either cheated on them or abandoned them and it was only when the women found other women who had had the same experience that they could again have any sexual pleasure (Shui, 1989, pp. 66-95). The publication of such accounts, whether fact or fiction, indicates an opening up of the Chinese intellectual scene and may be compared to the appearance of *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928) in English. The topic is no longer a forbidden one, but fictional portrayals might be safer than reality providing lesbians are described in negative terms.

Those cases of lesbianism reported in the Chinese press today all became public because they came to police attention. There were more cases of lesbianism reported than male homosexuality. In one case, a woman engineer used acid to burn her former partner because she was planning to marry a man (He and Fang, 1989, pp. 4-6). In another, a young (24 years old) female fashion designer became a lover of a girl friend of her sister. The relationship was discovered by the fashion designer's parents who forced her to go to the hospital to cure her "disease" (He and Fang, 1989, pp. 8-10). Another case study dealt with two prostitutes in Kuangzhou who after being hired by a customer to engage in sex with him and with each other found they enjoyed it and became lovers. They were arrested as part of a roundup of prostitutes (He and Fang, 1989, pp. 13-15).

An unmarried worker who had difficulty finding a wife was introduced to a young woman to whom he almost immediately proposed. On the wedding night, the newlywed couple were interrupted in their lovemaking by the appearance of the woman's lover who then moved in with them. The husband was willing and the three experimented with various sexual positions. The authorities were called by the wife when she found her husband more interested in her partner than in herself (He and Fang, 1989, pp. 15-18).

Still another account is of lesbianism in a Buddhist convent. Here a newcomer upset a traditional relationship between two of the nuns, and as this matter became public, the two nuns were forced to leave the convent. When the two were formally denounced to authorities, they reported that it was the older nuns in the convent who had originally introduced them to lesbianism (He and Fang, 1989, pp. 18-20).

The final account is of two women in a lesbian relationship who continued the relationship secretly even after one of them was married. Eventually the relationship came to the attention of the authorities who reported that the husband thought the other woman came to see his wife so frequently simply because they were such good friends (He and Fang, 1989, pp. 20-22).

Most of these activities came to the attention of police because someone denounced the individuals involved and it was during the investigation that the lesbianism was discovered. This might indicate that if two women lived quietly and harmoniously together they probably would not come to the attention of the authorities, and could probably continue to stay together. Many probably do, but this requires such secrecy that we cannot given an accurate picture of lesbianism in China.

The two journalists who reported the above cases indicated that information about lesbianism is extremely difficult to uncover. Since lesbianism and homosexuality are crimes for which individuals can be jailed, it is only when it comes to the attention of authorities that journalists and others have any chance of reporting it. Still the relaxation of publication barriers to information about police cases of lesbianism allows us to see the tip of an iceberg of sexuality in China. We know that lesbians continue to find ways of making contact with each other, that they come from all walks and stations in life, but how many remain submerged is something that is unknown. Of the few indicators of the potential existence of larger numbers of Chinese society are two surveys of the Chinese in Taiwan by a Taiwanese psychiatrist (Wen, 1973, 1978). His first survey, part of a doctoral dissertation, asked only about homosexual and lesbian "inclinations or practice." One percent of his subjects admitted to such feelings or activities. In a slightly more sophisticated study conducted 5 years later, Wen sought to

determine how many woman had engaged in "pleasurable" lesbian practice, and how many might have had, at least on some occasion, lesbian inclinations. One percent reported pleasurable lesbian practices while 21% said they had had lesbian inclinations at some time. Though the surveys leave a lot to be desired, they indicate that even in repressed societies, and Taiwan is only beginning to open up, lesbianism exists and if the Taiwan figure of 1% is any reflection of Chinese reality, there are many lesbians in China. We hope the next report on lesbianism will not have to rely on police blotters, prisoners, or fictional recreations to demonstrate that the long history of lesbianism in China continues to flourish.

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